

*Rise above events that are inconsequential — both bad and good — for they are not worth disturbing your composure.*¹

When our *menuchat ha-nefesh* is disturbed it is because our *yetzer hara* perceives a threat to our security. Both good news and bad are precisely “good” or “bad” in reference to our security. Therefore, the question that must be part of our preparations for being able to maintain *menuchat ha-nefesh* is: “Of what does our sense of security consist?” “Who are we, really?” “What qualities constitute ‘us’?” Answering these questions requires a willingness to enter into an in-depth evaluation of what we can call the “truth” of our being as opposed to the masks, if you will, that often express our being in the world. For, it will turn out, that it is those masks that are most directly threatened by events, good or ill, and it is in an effort to maintain those masks that the *yetzer hara* goes to work. As we have learned before, no *middah* is an island. Rather, all *middah* work requires the application of multiple *middot* in evaluating our behavior. We find that just as *menuchat ha-nefesh* is related to *seder*, so also is it related to both *emet* and *anavah*. We will only mention these connections here, and of course, will re-visit them to some degree when we study those *middot* individually.

We begin with *emet*. In this context the *middah* of *emet* will be specifically called upon to help us determine the truth of our being such that we can experience a sense of security that is based on maintaining that truth rather than the negative effort of maintaining the masks we adopt to seemingly protect ourselves in the world. The word “seemingly” is crucial here. The masks we wear only seem to protect us. They are strategies that we have adopted in response to real threats, usually threats against us made at a time when our knowledge of ourselves was insufficient to respond to those threats with interior strength. We adopted these masks because they helped us hide, generally, from threats that we did not have the resources to withstand. Once they are in place, these masks become who we think we are. But who we really are can only be determined by coming to know the truth of our soul as distinguished from our self. When we keep in mind that the truth of our soul is determined by the extent to which we are able to contract our self and make space for the other within ourselves, we begin to recognize

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Pages 108-115.

and appreciate our truth. In the face of that truth our masks often become unnecessary and any effort on the part of the *yetzer hara* to protect those masks is ill conceived.

Mussar defines *emet* as the “seal of God,” by which we understand that what supports our ability to bear the burden of the other through language and expression is truth and the extension of that infinitely is the inscription of God in the world.

It follows, therefore, that the effort to sustain *menuchat ha-nefesh* through *emet* leads directly to the need to meditate on *anava*. *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* defines *anava* as the ability to learn from all people. This ability requires the strenuous effort of putting aside our typically fearful and therefore judgmental responses to people in all situations. To learn from all people, to make all people into our teachers, requires a self-effacement that allows us to see the other person clearly for what and who he or she is in the moment we encounter him or her. To see, if you will, him or her behind whatever masks he or she projects. Our response to seeing the other with this clarity is then to allow ourselves to be seen in equal clarity. Thus we find that *menuchat ha-nefesh* intersects with *anava* and *emet* as well as with *seder*.

Menuchat Ha-Nefesh, as we have already pointed out, requires preparation before the fact. When we are confronted with an event we must be able to respond out of an already cultivated commitment to the obligation to bear the burden of the other that precisely defines the future; we must already have deeply considered our own truth and the fact that our truth is not the same as the masks we wear to protect ourselves in the world; and we must already have cultivated a sensibility of humility, allowing us to see the truth of others rather than their masks. With this in mind we turn to the specific actions that are available to us when we confront a situation that calls upon our *menuchat ha-nefesh*, and as we have done previously, we will view these encounters from the perspectives of both *kibbush* and *tikkun*.

When we encounter either bad news or good, an interruption in the flow of our daily routine caused by either, the first question that we must ask ourselves, even before the question we spoke about last week: “What about the other?” is: “If we are reacting in a self concerned mode, is it on behalf of our true self or on behalf of one of our masks? Keeping in mind that “our true self” is as a soul, and as a soul we are constituted by the ability to constrain the self and make space for the other, are we reacting in such a way as

to impede our soul in favor of our self or vice versa? If we find that, indeed, our response is caused precisely because our self is reasserting itself in the place we've made for the other, then our first obligation is to reject this reassertion precisely by then asking the question: "What about the other?" This assumes that we can restrain the self even when we are unaware of the origin of the mask that the self is trying to maintain. As long as we are aware that we are often made up of a series of multiple masks, but that they can be refused and resisted, then this *kibbush* can succeed.

However, *tikkun* in regard to *menuchat ha-nefesh* is both more difficult and more powerful. If we have done the deep work of identifying the source of the masks we wear and recognize that they are not authentically who we are, if we have used *emet* to ascertain what our truth is and are able to extend that truth infinitely so that in every encounter our very being is constituted by our ability to respond to every and any event on behalf of another, then the cumulative energy that we have available to serve the other is greatly magnified. That is, when *tikkun* in regard to *menuchat ha-nefesh* is achieved we are not only able to serve another in any situation but to serve the other more. We are granted what we might call a surplus of potential energy for service that will not only address the needs of the closest other in the particular situation, but we compel us out of those very same circumstances to serve the next other and the next. For this reason, also, our tradition refers to *emet* as the "seal of God:" the power of *emet* allows us to maintain *menuchat ha-nefesh*, which in turn allows us to extend our ability to serve the other infinitely.